



Did You Know???

Family School Linkages Project: Building Better Relationships between School Personnel & the Families of their Students

Adapted from J.E. Funkhouser. & M.R. Gonzales: Executive Summary in “Family Involvement in Children’s Education: Successful Local Approaches”

About Families and Schools as Partners?

Thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement in school (Eagle, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Ziegler, 1987). When families are involved in their children's education, children earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to enroll in higher education than students with less involved families. For these reasons, increasing family involvement in the education of their children is an important goal for schools, particularly those serving low-income and other students at risk of failure.

If families are to work with schools as partners in the education of their children, schools must provide them with the opportunities and support they need to become involved. Too often schools expect families to do it all alone. Developing effective partnerships with families requires that all school staff (administrators, teachers, and support staff) create a school environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to raise questions and voice their concerns as well as to participate appropriately in decision-making. Developing partnerships also requires that school staff provide parents with the information and training they need to become involved and that they reach out to parents with invitations to participate in their children's learning.

How do schools that are successful engage families?

Schools that are most successful in engaging parents and other family members in support of their children's learning look beyond traditional definitions of parent involvement--participating in a parent teacher organization or signing quarterly report cards--to a broader conception of parents as full partners in the education of their children. Rather than striving only to increase parent participation in school-based activities, successful schools seek to support families in their activities outside of school that can encourage their children's learning. Schools that have developed successful partnerships with parents view student achievement as a shared responsibility, and all stakeholders--including parents, administrators, teachers, and community leaders--play important roles in supporting children's learning.

Successful school-family partnerships require the sustained mutual collaboration, support, and participation of school staffs and families at home and at school in activities that can directly affect the success of children's learning. If families are to work with schools as full partners in the education of their children, schools must provide them with the opportunities and support they need for success. Successful district and school programs enhance parent-school communications and help parents support their children's academic work at school and at home. Some of the programs involve parents in school planning and governance activities and as volunteers. Some also provide coordinated essential non-educational services for families to support their children's academic development.

What strategies do these schools use to overcome common barriers to family involvement?

- **Overcoming time and resource constraints.** In order to build strong partnerships, families and school staff members need time to get to know one another, plan how they will work together to increase student learning, and carry

out their plans. Successful programs find the time and resources for both teachers and parents to develop school-family partnerships.

- **Providing information and training to parents and school staff.** Without the information and skills to communicate with each other, misperceptions and distrust can flourish between parents and school personnel. Initiatives to bridge the information gap between parents and school are at the center of each of the 20 programs reviewed for this Idea Book. Through workshops and a variety of outreach activities such as informative newsletters, handbooks, and home visits, parents and school staff across these programs are learning how to trust each other and work together to help children succeed in school.
- **Restructuring schools to support family involvement.** Developing a successful school-family partnership must be a whole school endeavor, not the work of a single person or program. Traditional school organization and practices, especially in secondary schools, often discourage family members from becoming involved. To create a welcoming environment for parents, one that enlists their support in helping their children succeed, schools can make changes that make them more personal and inviting places. Whatever steps schools take in developing partnerships with families, schools that are most successful are prepared to reconsider all of their established ways of doing business and to restructure in ways that will make them less hierarchical, more personal, and more accessible to parents.
- **Bridging school-family differences.** Language and cultural differences as well as differences in educational attainment separating families and school staff can make communication and family participation in school activities difficult. Strategies to address these differences include reaching out to parents with little formal education, addressing language differences through bilingual services for communicating both orally and in writing with families about school programs and children's progress, and promoting cultural understanding to build trust between home and school.
- **Tapping external supports for partnerships.** Many Title I schools have nourished and strengthened partnerships by tapping the supports available in their local communities and beyond. Collaborative efforts to provide schools and families with the tools they need to support learning can include partnerships with local businesses, health care and other community service agencies, and colleges and universities, as well as supports provided by school districts and states.

Guidelines for Effective Partnerships

Experience in many schools and districts points to some common characteristics of successful school-family partnerships. Schools that succeed in involving large numbers of parents and other family members in the education of their children invest energy in finding solutions for problems, not excuses. Successful schools view children's success as a shared responsibility, and all stakeholders—including parents, administrators, teachers, and community leaders—play important roles in supporting children's learning. Indeed, successful schools adopt a team approach, where each partner assumes responsibilities for the success of the school-family partnership.

At the same time that successful partnerships share accountability, specific stakeholders must assume individual responsibility in order for partnerships to work. Above all, schools, under the leadership of principals, possess the primary responsibility for initiating school-family partnerships. Schools can invest heavily in professional development that supports family involvement, create time for staff to work with parents, supply necessary resources, design innovative strategies to meet the needs of diverse families, and provide useful information to families on how they can contribute to their children's learning.

Once schools initiate the dialogue and bring parents in as full partners, families are typically ready and willing to assume an equal responsibility for the success of their children. Ideally, this partnership takes place in a context where policymakers, community groups, and employers share the goals of the school and actively contribute to the attainment of those goals. In sum, a broad-based coalition of like-minded stakeholders is the foundation of any successful partnership. When community members work together, all stakeholders--and especially children--stand to win.

Effective strategies for partnerships differ from community to community, and the most appropriate strategies for a particular community will depend on local interests, needs, and resources. Even so, successful approaches to promoting family involvement in the education of their children share an emphasis on innovation and flexibility. Many schools have enhanced their ability to be innovative and flexible by implementing school wide programs. Their experiences suggest the following guidelines for successful partnerships:

- **There is no "one size fits all" approach to partnerships.** Build on what works well. Begin the school-family partnership by identifying, with families, the strengths, interests, and needs of families, students, and school staff, and design strategies that respond to identified strengths, interests, and needs.
- **Training and staff development is an essential investment.** Strengthen the school-family partnership with professional development and training for all school staff as well as parents and other family members. Both school staff and families need the knowledge and skills that enable them to work with one another and with the larger community to support children's learning.
- **Communication is the foundation of effective partnerships.** Plan strategies that accommodate the varied language and cultural needs as well as lifestyles and work schedules of school staff and families. Even the best planned school-family partnerships will fail if the participants cannot communicate effectively.
- **Flexibility and diversity are key.** Recognize that effective parent involvement takes many forms that may not necessarily require parents' presence at a workshop, meeting, or school. The emphasis should be on parents helping children learn, and this can happen in schools, homes, or elsewhere in a community.
- **Projects need to take advantage of the training, assistance, and funding offered by sources external to schools.** These can include school districts, community organizations and public agencies, local colleges and universities, state education agencies, and ED-sponsored Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers.⁴ While Title I program funds support the parent involvement activities of many programs featured here, several have increased the resources available for parent involvement activities by looking beyond school walls.
- **Change takes time.** Recognize that developing a successful school-family partnership requires continued effort over time, and that solving one problem often creates new challenges. Further, a successful partnership requires the involvement of many stakeholders, not just a few.
- **Projects need to regularly assess the effects of the partnership using multiple indicators.** These may include indicators of family, school staff, and community participation in and satisfaction with school-related activities. They may also include measures of the quality of school-family interactions and of student educational progress.

Although it is impossible to attribute student achievement gains or other student outcomes in schools or districts solely to their parent involvement activities, it does appear that many schools that make parent involvement a priority also see student outcomes improve. These positive outcomes may be due to increased parent involvement itself, or, what is more likely, to a whole constellation of factors, including a strong instructional program and a commitment to high standards for all students. Nevertheless, it appears that strong parent involvement is an important feature of many schools that succeed in raising student achievement.

Source:

Funkhouser, J.E. & Gonzales, M.R. (1997). Family Involvement in Children's Education: Successful Local Approaches. OERI, U.S. Dept. of Education.

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/execsumm.html>